Creating Inclusive Classrooms for Transgender Students

Faculty, staff, and teaching assistants are all responsible for creating welcoming and inclusive environments in the classroom. In recent years, cultural, political, and legal resistance to the oppression of transgender people has resulted in greater visibility of the issues facing this population and growing recognition of discrimination on the basis of gender identity and gender expression.

As these issues gain greater attention, as obstacles to transgender people’s participation in education and employment are addressed, and as Augsburg continues to position itself as a welcoming and inclusive environment for students of all gender identities and gender expressions, we will likely continue to have more transgender students in our classes and programs.

These guidelines may be helpful in ensuring that your classroom or program is a welcoming place for Augsburg’s transgender and gender nonconforming students, and ensuring that unintentional exclusionary practices are reduced and eliminated, allowing students to perform at their full potential. This reaffirms Augsburg’s commitment to intentional diversity and to providing an inclusive and affirming learning environment for all students.

Classroom Guidelines & Standards

Set a tone in the classroom of respect and critical inquiry. At the beginning of each semester, when establishing the guidelines for class, include something like: “It is important that this classroom be a respectful environment where everyone can fully participate. All students should be referred to by their preferred name and their preferred pronouns (like she, ze, he, they, or no pronouns).” Doing this sets a tone for challenging assumptions about people’s bodies, their identities, and the ways they present themselves. This can also encourage critical engagement with the authors and subjects of texts and ideas in our classes.

Roll Call

Avoid calling the roll or otherwise reading the roster aloud until you have given students a chance to state what they prefer to be called, in case the roster represents a prior name.

Names & Pronouns

Allow students to choose what name and pronoun they use. Avoid making assumptions based on what is on the class roster or on a student’s appearance. A great way to accomplish this is to pass around a seating chart sign-in sheet and ask them to indicate these two items in writing, and then use them when you call on students or refer to them in class.

If you aren’t sure of a person’s pronouns (and there isn’t someone around to let you know), ask them or refer to them by their name only. Making an assumption about someone’s pronouns is the worst option. One way to be respectful is to share your own first: “I use she/her/hers pronouns. I want to make sure I address you correctly; which pronouns do you use?” Another way to ask is, “How would you like to be addressed?” This may be challenging at first, but a person who often experiences being addressed incorrectly may see it as a sign of respect and that you are interested in getting it right.

Modeling Behavior

When facilitating a group discussion, ask people to identify their pronouns when they go around and do introductions. This will allow everyone in the room the chance to self-identify and to get each other’s pronouns right the first time. It will also reduce the burden on anyone whose pronoun is often misidentified and may help them access the discussion more easily because they do not have to fear an embarrassing mistake made by another student or the instructor. Model this by
saying, “We’re going to go around and say or names and pronouns. I’ll start: My name is Michael and I use he and him pronouns.”

**Previous Names**

If a student has a previous name and/or pronouns that you are aware of because you knew them before they changed it, or because it is on the roster, do not use it or reveal it to others. Well-meaning comments such as “I knew Gina when she was Bill,” even if meant to be supportive, reveal what might be very personal information to the student and unnecessarily draw attention to their trans identity.

**Address Mistakes**

We are all human, and no matter how much we try, we are going to make mistakes! If you make a mistake about someone’s name or pronouns, correct yourself. Going on as if it did not happen is actually less respectful than making the correction. This also saves the person who was misidentified from having to correct an incorrect pronoun before it is planted in the minds of classmates or anyone else who heard the mistake. As educators, especially, it is essential that we model respectful behavior and keep in mind that students pay very close attention to the ways we interact with our students in the classroom.

**Correct Others**

Whether in office hours, when speaking with students in groups, or when speaking with faculty and staff, when someone else makes a name/pronoun mistake, correct them. It is polite to provide a correction, whether or not the person whose pronoun was misused is present. Allowing the mistake to go uncorrected ensures future uncomfortable interactions for the person who is being misidentified. For example, saying, “I believe Gina uses ze and hir pronouns.”

**Respect Boundaries**

Avoid asking personal questions of transgender people that you would not ask of others. Because of the sensationalist media coverage of transgender people’s lives, there is often an assumption that personal questions (e.g., “Have you had surgery?”, “What was your former name?”, etc.) are appropriate when they actually are not. Never ask about a transgender person’s body or medical care, their old name, why or how they know they are trans, their sexual orientation or practices, their family’s reaction to their gender identity, or other questions that are irrelevant to your relationship with them unless they invite you to do so or voluntarily share the information.

**Challenge the Gender Binary**

There are many students, including at Augsburg, who identify outside the gender binary of woman/man. Students may identify as genderqueer, genderfluid, multigender, or a number of other gender identities.

In many of our disciplines, our fundamental academic assumptions, curricula, texts, and research assumes and/or is focused on a strict adherence to the gender binary that largely ignores and invalidates transgender and intersex individuals. The continued reference to only women and men in the classroom can be alienating, unwelcoming, and disparaging for students who identify outside the binary. Being clear about the limits of the texts or research on which you are focusing can help tremendously: “This study only focused on men and women, but did not include individuals of other gender identities.”

Being cognizant of one’s own language is also vital. Some examples include:

- Use “individuals of all gender identities” or simply “people” instead of “men and women.”
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- Use “partner” or “significant other” instead of “boyfriend”/”girlfriend” or “husband”/”wife.”
- Avoid titles such as “Mr.,” “Mrs.,” and “Ms.”

Also, be aware of the assumptions you make about individuals who identify as “men” or “women,” particularly around one’s body parts, gender expression, and/or gender roles. For example, one’s genitalia or chromosomal makeup does not determine one’s gender identity or gender expression.

Frequently Used Terminology

- **Cisgender** – An umbrella term used to describe individuals whose gender expression and gender identity is congruent with the sex assigned to them at birth. (e.g., a person assigned female sex at birth, identifies as a woman, expresses as primarily feminine, and is recognized and affirmed by 99.9% of others as a woman). Also known as gender conforming.
- **Transgender** – An umbrella term used to describe individuals whose gender expression and/or gender identity is not congruent with the sex assigned to them at birth.
- **Gender Nonconforming** – Term used to describe those whose gender identity is congruent with the sex assigned to them at birth but whose gender expression is not validated by dominant culture. (e.g., a person assigned male sex as birth, identifies as a man, but primarily expresses as feminine and/or androgynous).
- **Intersex** – Umbrella term for those whose biological sex does not fit the typical characteristics or definition of being “female” or “male.”
- **Agender** – Gender identity for those who do not identify as having a particular gender.
- **Genderfluid** – Gender identity term used for those who identify as having a changing or fluid gender identity or expression.
- **Genderqueer** – Gender identity term used for those who identify as between or beyond the gender binary of woman/man.
- **Multigender** – Gender identity for those who identify as having multiple genders.
- **Two Spirit** – Term used by many Native American tribes for Indigenous trans and gender nonconforming individuals. This concept has been reclaimed in recent years, as it was an identity that was oppressed as a result of European colonization.

Pronouns

Listed in following order: subjective, objective, possessive adjective, possessive pronoun, and reflexive.

- She, her, her, hers, herself
- He, him, his, his, himself
- They, them, their, theirs, themselves
- Ze, hir, hir, hirs, hirself
- Ze, zim, zir, zirs, zirself
- Ze, zir, zir, zirs, zirself
- Ey, em, eir, eirs, eirself
- Per, per, per, pers, perself
- It, it, its, its, itself
- Some individuals prefer to be called only by their name and not by any pronouns.

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